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Soviet Response to an Iranian-Iraqi Clash

An Intelligence Memorandum

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Soviet Response to an
Iranian-Iraqi Clash ☐

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Summary

The Soviets are concerned that an Iranian-Iraqi military clash would damage their relations with both countries and are worried that such a clash might provide the United States with a pretext for intervening in Iran. Consequently, they probably believe that their interests are best served by the prevention or limitation of such a clash and by trying not to alienate either Baghdad or Tehran by going very far to support either side. ☐ 25X1

The Soviets may nonetheless believe they can afford to tilt somewhat toward Iran. For its part, Iraq has a strong interest in maintaining its arms supply relationship with the USSR. Should full-scale hostilities break out and Iraq threaten to occupy parts of Iran, the Soviets might try to restrain Baghdad by warning that future arms supplies could be endangered. ☐ 25X1

Should Iranian-Iraqi hostilities seriously threaten Iran's territorial integrity, the Soviets might decide to intervene militarily. The scope and nature of their actions would depend in large part on their assessment of the likely US response; a minimum goal would be to protect their own border. If Moscow judged the risk of a direct confrontation with the United States to be high—as we believe is currently the case—it probably would be deterred from undertaking massive military action to seize the oilfields in Khuzestan. ☐

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**Soviet Response to an
Iranian-Iraqi Clash** ☐

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**Soviet Interest in
Iraq and Iran**

Rising tensions between Iran and Iraq have increased the risk of a major armed conflict in the Persian Gulf region. The possibility of a full-scale clash has doubtless sparked discussion in Moscow concerning possible Soviet responses to an outbreak of fighting near the USSR's southern border. Soviet policy options are limited, however, because the Soviets want to maintain and improve relations with both Baghdad and Tehran and deny the United States a pretext for intervention in Iran. ☐

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Although political relations between the USSR and Iraq have deteriorated in recent years—a process accelerated by the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan—the Soviets still want to maintain their ties to Baghdad. Iraq remains a major client for military sales, a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty partner, and a leading proponent of the Arab rejectionist cause. The Soviets value Iraq as a source of hard currency earnings and may anticipate that Iraqi oil will become more important as the USSR's own energy situation worsens in the 1980s. The Soviets certainly want to avoid a further sharp downturn in relations that might push Iraq into abrogating its treaty or turning more toward Western Europe for arms purchases. Almost certainly, they are also anxious to deny the United States any opportunity to improve ties with Iraq. ☐

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The Soviets are, at the same time, continuing their efforts to improve relations with the Khomeini regime in Iran. They are undoubtedly encouraged by the break in US-Iranian relations, hoping this will distract Iran's attention from the Soviet role in Afghanistan and lead to a reduction in the influence of more moderate, anti-Soviet Iranian politicians such as Bani-Sadr. The Soviets probably think that the eruption of an Iranian-Iraqi clash would be particularly inopportune now, since it would distract Tehran's attention from its intensified clash with the United States. ☐

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Tactical Dilemma

The Soviets will find it very difficult to balance between Iran and Iraq, given that each country is already suspicious of Soviet intentions and would be annoyed by any perceived Soviet tilt toward the other. ☐

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The Soviets would prefer not to comment directly on the merits of the dispute but to try to focus attention elsewhere. Their main thrust, already developing, will be to blame the United States for exacerbating the situation. A TASS commentary on 11 April accused the United States of trying to set Iran and Iraq against each other and to aggravate tension in the region. A Moscow Radio commentary on 13 April followed this same line, asserting that neither Iran nor Iraq needed such a conflict and that only the United States would benefit from the tense situation. This approach seeks to capitalize on Iran's rabid anti-Americanism as well as on Iraq's concern that instability in the Gulf will lead to increased US activity there. []

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Iran, however, is already pressing Moscow to support the Iranian case against Iraq. On 11 April Iranian Ambassador to Moscow Mokri urged the USSR to stop supplying arms to Iraq, charging that Iraq, an "imperialist power," was using these arms to encourage Iranian separatists and oppose Iran's revolution. The Soviets have so far not responded to this pressure. On 11 April a lengthy TASS report on Mokri's press conference said only that he had presented Iran's position in the dispute and omitted his reference to a curtailment of Soviet arms supplies to Iraq. []

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The Soviets, however, do appear to be tilting somewhat toward Iran, at least rhetorically. They may believe that they have some leeway to criticize Iraq, since Baghdad has a strong interest in maintaining the arms-supply relationship. Indeed, they may be more concerned not to antagonize Iran, with which they are still trying to construct a working relationship. In addition, as Iraq is militarily stronger, the Soviets may seek to court Iranian favor by urging Iraqi restraint. []

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While Soviet commentary following the last major border clash between Iraq and Iran last December tried to project a balanced position, the Soviets appeared particularly anxious to assuage an expressed Iranian concern that the Soviet Union would inevitably support Iraq in any clash with Iran. A Persian language Soviet broadcast in late December disputed this claim and the Soviet-sponsored *National Voice of Iran* went even further, claiming that the USSR "offers sincere support to the Iranian revolution." []

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Current Soviet commentary continues to be somewhat slanted in Iran's favor, and a TASS reference to US interest in studying outlets to Iraq plays to Iranian charges of US-Iraqi complicity. On the other hand, the Soviet position on the three disputed islands in the Persian Gulf has suggested favoritism toward Baghdad. The *Moscow Radio* broadcast to Iran on 8 April referred to Iraq's demand that Iran withdraw its troops from these islands over which, it said, Iran had established "its supervision" in 1971. Such references, conveying doubt about Iran's claims, are certain to annoy Tehran. []

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As these examples illustrate, Moscow has only limited maneuvering room to exploit tensions between the two. Given the volatility of the situation and the suspicions of both Iran and Iraq, it would be easy for Moscow to miscalculate and severely strain relations with one country or the other. In addition, the Soviets are certainly aware that they have little leverage in this situation; their main concern, therefore, will be to limit the potential damage to their own position. ☐

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If War Breaks Out

Should full-scale hostilities break out between Iraq and Iran, the Soviets might seek to end the fighting by supporting mediation. Although the Soviets might consider offering their good offices, we doubt that either Iran or Iraq would accept Moscow as a middleman. Furthermore, the possible advantage of this role in terms of gaining status and leverage is balanced by the potential risk of damaging ties with one or both of the protagonists. Moscow might well think it better to let others take the lead. If mediation were to fail and should Iraq threaten to occupy parts of Iran, the Soviets might attempt to exert some pressure on Iraq by warning that future deliveries of Soviet arms and spare parts might be affected. ☐

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We doubt that the Soviets see an Iranian-Iraqi conflict as an opportunity for them to move militarily into Iran, although Moscow could use the threat of Iraqi intervention to justify its own intervention under the terms of the 1921 treaty. Under such a scenario, oil-rich Khuzestan presumably would be the Soviet objective. The Soviets would have to calculate, however, that in addition to the military problems involved, including the possibility of a clash with Iraqi forces, the United States would respond militarily to such a move. Furthermore, the Soviets are not likely to favor such radical action while Iran's internal politics might evolve to their advantage. ☐

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The Soviets almost certainly would not welcome Iraqi seizure of Khuzestan, as this could create pressures for both their own and US military involvement. Should Iraq seize Khuzestan and should the Soviets believe that the United States was intent on taking military action against Iran, they might decide, at a minimum, to move into northern Iran to establish the security of their own border and assert their own position in the region. ☐

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Conclusion

The Soviets are concerned that an Iranian-Iraqi military clash would damage their relations with both countries, and are worried that such a clash might provide the United States with a pretext for intervening in Iran. Consequently, they probably believe that their interests are best served by the prevention or limitation of such a clash and by trying not to alienate either Baghdad or Tehran by going very far to support either side. ☐

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We believe that the Soviets will seek to maintain a balanced policy and to preserve and extend their influence in both countries through conventional diplomatic and economic policies. They will continue to support those elements in Iran which are working for an eventual leftist takeover and may, under certain circumstances, increase support to minority groups in Iran.

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The Soviet posture could change, however, in response to an evolving situation. Should Iranian-Iraqi hostilities appear to be fostering a significant erosion of Tehran's authority and producing Iran's fragmentation, the Soviets might reluctantly decide to intervene militarily. Their objectives would depend in large part on their assessment of the US response. At a minimum, they would seek to ensure stability on their border. Having crossed a high-risk threshold in invading Iran, however, they might seize the opportunity to move into Khuzestan—the target of highest value—and to orchestrate the installation of a pro-Soviet government in Tehran. We regard such decisive military action as unlikely, largely because it would risk direct confrontation with the United States.

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21 April 1980

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THE IRAN-IRAQ BORDER AREA
MILITARY GEOGRAPHY AND TROOP DEPLOYMENT

Summary

The Iraq-Iran border extends for 1,458 kilometers from its intersection with the Turkish frontier to the Persian Gulf. Terrain along the border ranges from extremely rugged in the north to low and marshy in the south. There are few areas along the border suitable for full scale conventional military operations. The best would be in the south -- in the low and relatively well drained area around Ahvaz, in Iran, and in the middle sector -- the area along the Baghdad-Kermanshah road. Iraqi armored and mechanized forces in the border area are well positioned to mount offensive operations into Iran along these axes. []

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Geographic Sectors

-Northern (from the Turkish frontier to the road between Baghdad and Kermanshah)

This sector straddles the rugged northern ranges of the Zagros Mountains. Elevations range from more than 3,600 meters in the north to 1,000 meters in the south. The area is sparsely populated, mostly by Kurds who have long fought for greater autonomy from both Iraq and Iran. The rugged and forested mountains of the region are well suited for guerrilla warfare and have been the locale for Kurdish insurgencies with both Iraq and Iran. It is not well suited, however, for conventional military operations because of the rugged terrain and lack of good roads. Of the four roads (all loose surfaced) that cross the border, only one is believed to be two lane. All have torturous alignments which would impede the movement of a conventional military force. []

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-Middle (from the Baghdad-Kermanshah road south to the latitude of Al Kut, Iraq and Dezful, Iran)

This sector, also lightly populated, consists of lower and less rugged terrain, particularly in Iraq where dissected plains and rolling hills would permit cross-country movement by conventional forces. Farther away from the border in Iraq, however, the terrain

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becomes either marshy or criss-crossed by irrigation canals and would not be suitable for such movement. On the Iran side, the Zagros Mountains -- lower than in the north -- extend near to the border and would preclude conventional military operations. Because the border sector is dry and has little vegetation cover for concealment, it would also be generally unsuitable for use by irregular forces. []

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The road between Baghdad and Kermanshah is the only hard surface two-lane road between the two countries and would be a likely avenue for any large-scale military invasion into either country. Elsewhere, no good roads cross the border. The paved road from Kermanshah to Mehran on the Iran side is believed to deteriorate into a one lane loose surfaced road across the border. []

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-Southern (from the latitude of Al Kut and Dezful south to the Persian Gulf)

This sector consists mostly of marshy areas flanking the Tigris River and the Shatt al Arab. The rural areas are sparsely populated by a mainly Arab population. There are several cities on both sides of the border. The natural and cultivated vegetation would provide some concealment for irregular forces but, because of the poor drainage, the area would be poorly suited for cross-country movement by conventional military forces except in the better drained area near Ahvaz in Iran. There are no road connections between the two countries in this sector. There are, however, relatively good roads on both sides that could carry military traffic near the border. The Soviet-equipped Iraqi forces are well equipped with bridging equipment and amphibious vehicles needed to cross the Shatt al Arab River separating the two countries.

Troop Deployments in Border Area

Iraq's military options for a full scale conventional attack against Iran are limited to the southern half of the border area, along the Baghdad-Kermanshah road, and in the southern border area. Iraqi forces are in a good position to take advantage of either avenue of approach. One Iraqi armor division is located near Jalula, on the Baghdad-Kermanshah road, and at least two other armored divisions are within easy striking distance. Only one Iranian armored division is located at Kermanshah. []

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